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ABSTRACT

Social penetration has been described by S.W. Littlejohn (1992) as "the process of increasing disclosure and intimacy in a relationship." The phrase "social penetration" originated with I. Altman and D. Taylor, the foremost researchers in this area. From other theories, Altman and Taylor developed a unified theory which provided a stable base from which researchers could study. Before an understanding of the theory can be obtained, there must be knowledge of the philosophical perspective behind the orientation. Using the systems perspective, the definition of communication that supports social penetration theory is, as follows: communication is the process of exchanging symbols and gaining understanding and sharing from the exchange. Social penetration is consistently viewed as having 4 stages of penetration, summarized by Michael Roloff (1981): (1) orientation, with a ritualized conversation and disclosure of superficial information; (2) exploratory affective exchange--communication about superficial topics is expanded and there is movement toward inner layers; (3) affective exchange--movement to the central layers of personality; and (4) stable exchange, achieved in a few relationships. In research studies that use social penetration theory in their framework, its relation to individuals on a daily basis can be seen. For example, a longitudinal study of college roommates investigated developmental changes in social penetration processes. Another study investigated Japanese students at American universities and paired them with American student friends, examining their cross-cultural relationships. Exploring social penetration theory is of great importance to the study of communication. (Contains 2 figures and 17 references.) (NKA)

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Social Penetration:

A Description, Research, and Evaluation

Communication Theory

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In the search for understanding the origin, progression, and termination of relationships, researchers have produced many theories to explain these phenomena to the world. One of the most studied and well-known theories dealing with the relationship cycle is social penetration theory. This theory explores how we as individuals form the relationships in our lives and how we deal with them. It takes a central category of our existence (relationships) and hypothesizes about its functioning within the many systems in which we are surrounded. While producing much research, it has the potential to be be broadened to situations such as parent-child relationships and how that relates to the family as a whole, families in which one or more parents and/or children are step-parents and children, relationships within companies and how that affects the functioning of the entire system, and many more. By studying its overall structure and the research that has been done thus far, we can evaluate its strengths and weaknesses and project its future.

Littlejohn (1992) defines social penetration as "the process of increasing disclosure and intimacy in a relationship" (p.274). This simple definition is the result of a magnitude of research and theory from other disciplines as well as the work on social penetration theory itself. The phrase "social penetration" originated with Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor who are the foremost researches in this area

(Littlejohn, 1992). They credit many theories and concepts as being instrumental in the development of social penetration theory. Some of the most prevalent of these are social exchange theory, Thibaut and Kelley's comparison level, Homan's concepts of profit and distributive justice, Rokeach's belief system, Levin's delineation of the self into regions, and many others (Altman & Taylor, 1973).

From these theories, Altman and Taylor (1973) developed one unified theory which provided a stable base from which researchers could study. In their book, Social Penetration (1973), they described this theory in detail giving its history, research and opportunities for the future. They began doing informal analysis and searching the traditional social psychological literature and found that many different people in different fields had dealt with relational communication, but few had discovered consistent findings. Altman and Taylor remarked (1973), "Our initial efforts were not so much concerned with the discovery of new information as with getting a clearer picture of these events under experimentally controlled conditions. By so doing we hoped to set the stage for further research and theory about social relationships" (p. vi). I am one of those graduate students that Altman and Taylor want to embark on new research and I will attempt to paint a clearer picture of the social penetration process as it relates to the systems theory, cite

studies that use the social penetration theory, and evaluate this theory from the understanding that I have gained from studying it.

Before an understanding of the theory can be obtained, there must be a knowledge of the philosophical perspective from which I and the researchers view social penetration. There has been research done on this theory using the psychological, symbolic interaction, and systems philosophical perspectives. Littlejohn (1992) speaks of the psychological nature of social penetration because of the way in which the individual deals with rewards and costs. Much of the research concentrates on the relationships between two people and the way that they create a relationship together which is clearly a symbolic interaction point of view. But at the core of the theory, there are elements within the scope of the framework which make studying this process from the systems philosophical perspective the most adequate. In figure 1-1 (Altman & Taylor, 1973, p.6), this generic term, "situational factors", has a profound affect on the study of social

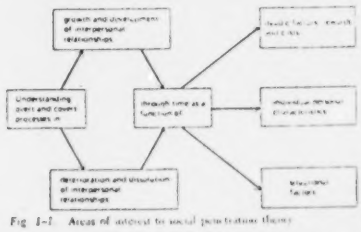

Figure 1-1

penetration. It suggests that social penetration must look at the "contexts" or "situations" in which relationships are in

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before being able to understand the process to its fullest extent. Littlejohn (1992) speaks of these "situations" as the "structure" of the system, "Communication consists of interaction, and interaction patterns constitute the structure of the system" (p. 54). Altman and Taylor take a systems point of view when examining the social penetration theory. They summarized their position and my own with this quote, "Interpersonal exchange functions as a 'system,' involving many levels of behavior which operate together - complimenting one another, substituting for one another and influencing one another. Or, to put it differently, the term 'social penetration' is intended to convey the idea that understanding the growth of social bonds requires analysis of 'whole people,' not separate and individual behaviors taken at one time" (Altman & Taylor, 1973, p. 5-6). Using the systems perspective, my definition of communication that supports social penetration theory is as follows: communication is the process of exchanging symbols and gaining understanding and sharing from the exchange. I will explain how this definition relates and defines the communication process of social penetration theory as I explain the theory itself.

Think back to the definition given earlier for social penetration. "Social penetration is the process of increasing disclosure and intimacy in a relationship" (Littlejohn, 1992, p. 274). Let's use this basic definition and explore its

importance and meaning within social penetration theory. Have you ever met someone and not know if you could trust them, but after really getting to know them over a period of time you trusted them with your innermost secrets? Or can you remember times when you kept running into someone at work which made you start talking and you ended up being close friends? In both of these examples, you were using social penetration. Altman and Taylor (1973) explained the social penetration process with two hypotheses:

> 1. Interpersonal exchange gradually progresses from superficial, nonintimate areas to more intimate, deeper layers of the selves as social factors.
> 2. People assess interpersonal rewards and costs, satisfaction and dissatisfaction, gained from interaction with others, and advancement of the relationship is heavily dependent on the amount and nature of the rewards and costs (p. 29).

Using the example of your friend at work, in the beginning of the relationship you probably just talked about work-related topics. Then, as you kept running into one another you began venturing out of superficial topics such as work and began talking about more personal topics on a more intimate level. Over a period of time, you developed a close relationship and could them talk to each other about anything. This briefly explains hypothesis #1. Hypothesis #2 can be seen in the

example of the friend you couldn't trust and then learned to trust. In the beginning, not being able to trust them was a high cost to you. As you began to trust them that cost actually became a reward.

Hypothesis #1 makes reference to "layers of the self" and can be looked at in terms of breadth and depth.

Figure 2-1

The diagram in figure 2-1 is a major tool for Altman and Taylor (1973) when explaining both of these terms. There are two aspects of breadth which are breadth category and breadth frequency. Breadth category refers to the number of topics which are made available to another person as a relationship develops (labeled block A & B). Breadth frequency is the number of specific characteristics under each breadth category which are made available to another person. For example, suppose block A of your personality was friends. The breadth category would be "friends" and the breadth frequency would be how much time you spent talking to the girl at work about things such as experiences with friends, belief about friends,

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etc. Notice that these aspects can vary in their intensity. A person could have a low breadth category revealing very few categories of their personality. They could have a high breadth frequency and talk about each category of their personality in great detail. Realize also that you could have a high breadth category and low breadth frequency and vice versa. You could reveal many categories of your personality to your friend at work but only explain a few items in each category.

The depth dimension in the Figure 2-1 by Altman and Taylor (1973) is likened to an "onion skin" structure (p. 17). Personality is thought of as a series of onion layers which differ as you move from the peripheral (outer) layers to the central (inner) layers. The outer layers are usually superficial information about a person such as family background, geographic history, likes and dislikes, etc. It is hypothesized that more information is given out of these peripheral layers early in the relationship and even as the relationship grows. In other words, more information is always given in the outer layers because they are less personal and/or hurtful to your character. Even though your co-worker is a close friend, you would not generally discuss intimate topics with her at work such as details about your love affairs or family problems. The central layers are thought of as core characteristics of your personality. They

do relate to the outer layers because they influence many of your ideas and feelings about certain topics. A further analogy of the onion is that over time more and more pins will be stuck in each breadth category which opens it up to reveal the many topics in each category.

Note here that this is not a mechanic process. People in a relationship are not necessarily at the same rate and level of penetration or disclosure at the same time. You may have decided that you wanted to get to know the girl at work long before she started to notice you. Also note that people are influenced by verbal, nonverbal, and environmentally oriented behaviors as they move toward deeper areas of their personalities (Altman & Taylor, 1973). This is true throughout the social penetration process. As you can see, the environment makes reference to the systems theory. Your environment is made up of the many systems in your life.

The second hypothesis of Altman and Taylor (1973) is equally important in understanding this social penetration process. It deals with the rewards and costs in a relationship and how they affect its progression and/or dissolution. Thibaut and Kelley give us a working definition which Altman and Taylor (1973) used for rewards and costs:

> By rewards, we refer to the pleasures, satisfactions, and gratifications the person enjoys. The provision of a means whereby a drive is reduced or a need fulfilled

constitutes a reward.

By costs, we refer to any factors that operate to inhibit or deter a performance of a sequence of behavior. The greater the deterrents to performing a given act - the greater the inhibition the individual has to overcome - the greater the cost of the act. (p. 31)

When you didn't trust a new acquaintance, your not doing so was the cost in the relationship or the "deterrent to performing the act" of trust. Your "drive was reduced" as you began to trust him or her and trust became a reward when it gave you pleasure to disclose to your friend. Altman and Taylor (1973) used Homan's concepts of profit and distributive justice to expand on this idea of rewards vs. costs. Profit is defined by Homans as the rewards minus the costs and distributive justice deals with the way in which rewards and costs are issued and how fairly that is done. Rewards should be proportional to the costs. The greater the rewards, the greater the cost. The greater the investment, the greater the profit. Let's examine how these concepts affect the social penetration process. Altman and Taylor (1973) proposed five properties which relate to these concepts:

1. Reward/cost ratios is the balance of positive and negative experiences in a social relationship. When you didn't trust your acquaintance, that cost out-weighed any rewards that were there.

2. The absolute reward and cost properties is the absolute magnitude of the positive and negative experiences.

3. The immediately obtained rewards and costs refers to how quickly the rewards and costs are obtained.

4. Projections to future rewards and costs are known as forecast rewards and costs. As you began to trust your acquaintance, you began to "forecast" if the rewards and costs would be proportional and if the relationship would be important enough to be a friendship.

5. The last property deals with the cumulation of rewards and costs throughout the history of the relationship. This cumulative rewards and costs is usually a characteristic of long term relationships where rewards and costs are not counted one-by-one but are looked at over a period of time (p.32-33).

Social penetration is consistently viewed as having four stages of penetration and these stages have appeared in most research. Michael E. Roloff (1981) summarized these stages best and uses Altman and Taylor's headings orientation, exploratory affective exchange, affective exchange, and stable exchange. In the first stage, orientation, there is highly ritualized conversation and mainly superficial information is disclosed. The relationship moves to the second stage if the relationship is decided as a rewarding one. In exploratory

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affective exchange, communication about superficial topics is expanded and there is some movement toward the inner layers. After this stage, another judgement on rewards is made and, if the decision is positive, movement to the next stage, affective exchange, is made. There is definite movement to the intermediate and central layers of personality. The last stage is called stable exchange and is achieved in very few relationships. Communication is efficient and very few topics cannot be discussed. Notice how these stages help to support the earlier analogy of breadth, depth, and the "onion skin" structure. In the first stage of penetration, couples would most likely have low breadth category, low breadth frequency, and be communicating from the peripheral layers of the onion. As the relationship grew, breadth category and breadth frequency would increase and there would be movement from the outer layers of the onion to the intermediate layers. Ideally, if stable exchange were reached there would be a high breadth category, high breadth frequency, and the central core of the onion would be penetrated.

Now, let's think back to my definition of communication and see how it has been defined in terms of the social penetration theory. Communication is the process of exchanging symbols and gaining understanding and sharing from the exchange. This word process as in "the process of communication" is supported by the fact that social

penetration is a process in itself. Altman and Taylor (1973) stated, "Thus understanding the social penetration process requires analysis of the 'whole people', not merely analysis of discrete behavioral events. Or, to reiterate, the social penetration process should be viewed as a 'system'"(p. 105). In the general framework of social penetration, there is the idea of exchanging symbols and through this exchange more knowledge is learned about the other person (disclosure). This knowledge is likened to understanding. More and more disclosure leads to sharing and a better understanding of that person which can be used for the good of the system. Keep in mind that this definition does allow for one's own understanding and sharing. Roloff (1981) summarized this process, "The exchange of increasing intimate information may serve to assure the relational partner of one's sincerity and good faith in the exchange. One is trusting the other with personally private information and is also communicating information about how one views a variety of phenomena including exchange. As a result of knowing another very well, we should become more certain that our exchanges will be dependable and equitable" (p. 77). From that idea, we hear the echoes of social exchange theory. Here again, Roloff (1981) helps us to understand these ideas, "An exchange can be thought of as a transference of something from one entity to another in return for something else. Foa and Foa have

suggested that an exchange unit involves a proaction and a reaction. A person gives or denies a resource to another (proaction) which elicits a certain response from the other person (reaction)" (p. 14). This supports the idea of the systems theory and the basis of the communication phenomenon which is action + reaction = interaction and is the way that my definition of communication is designed. The action is "exchanging symbols" and the reaction is "gaining understanding and sharing" which leads to interaction and thus communication. The communication occurs within the interaction of the two people and is then transported to the many systems in each of people's lives.

Next, we will look at studies that use social penetration theory in their framework. There were a number of studies dealing with this subject, but the irony was the differing philosophical perspectives that they took when studying it. Researchers such as Altman and Taylor claimed to support the systems perspective, but fail to give emphasis to the ways in which the relationships affect the system and others in the system. The theories that I will cite do deal in some small way with the systems theory, but there needs to be a great deal more research done from that perspective.

The Taylor Study was a thirteen-week longitudinal study of college roommates and investigated developmental changes in social penetration processes (Altman & Taylor, 1973). This

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study looked at the progression of self-disclosure over time, and the influence that individual, differences had on the process. Four questionnaires were administered to male college roommates at certain intervals during the semester. The first questionnaire was used to measure information exchange and did so by asking subjects to indicate what they had told their roommates about themselves. The second questionnaire dealt with behavioral aspects of penetration and social activities engaged with one's roommate. This questionnaire could have some systems thinking at its base because by engaging in activities one would be bringing the other into "his world;" therefore, systems would be overlapping. The third questionnaire involved interpersonal exchange of a biographical demographic nature. Both subjects were asked to answer this questionnaire twice, once for himself and once about his roommate, in order to see how well roommates knew each other. The fourth instrument was a modified version of an interpersonal familiarity questionnaire which dealt with values and attitudes about certain topics. The data indicated increases in social penetration processes over time. Disclosure at all levels of intimacy increased gradually, but at different rates. It also showed greater disclosure in superficial versus intimate areas and a general slowing down of the process at later stages. This study supported the social penetration ideals of progression of

self-disclosure over time for nonintimate to intimate levels of penetration.

In a more in-depth study, Gudykunst, Nishida, and Chua (1987) studied social penetration in Japanese-North American dyads to determine if the theory can be extended to intercultural relationships. Research done earlier by Gudykunst and Nishida on cross-culture social penetration in Japan and the United States had not examined relationships with people from two different cultures. Won-Doornink (1979, 1985) had also done research on social penetration theory across cultures. She examined the reciprocity process over time in Korean dyads and compared reciprocity over time in dyads in Korea and the United States. Her results supported social penetration theory in that the data revealed a linear inverse association between stage of relationship and reciprocity of non-intimate self-disclosure. Both Won-Doornink's research and Gudykunst and Nishida's (1983, 1986) suggest that social penetration theory is generalizable across cultures.

Japanese students studying at a large south-western university were asked to find a North American student he/she knew to participate in the study. This person could have any kind of relationship with the Japanese students and they ranged from casual acquaintances to lovers. They were given a questionnaire (in English) to complete independently. Each

partner was asked to label his/her relationship with the other person. This yielded three types of relationships: (a) relationships labeled low intimacy in both; (b) relationships labeled high intimacy in both; (c) and relationships which were mixed. Perceptions of social penetration were measured using Knapp, Ellis, and Williams (1980) 30 item instrument. Results of the study were consistent with Altman and Taylor's (1973) social penetration theory, as well as with Knapp, Ellis, and Williams' (1980) intracultural research in the United States (Gudykunst et al., 1987). This study suggests that social penetration theory is generalizable to Japanese-North American dyads; although, there were differences in perceived personalization, synchronization, and difficulty of communication.

In a different type of study, researcher C. Arthur Vanlear, Jr. (1987) examined three levels of self-disclosure (public, semiprivate, private-personal) in the social penetration process. The study tried to answer three questions: "(1) What is the nature of changes in the three levels of disclosure over time?, (2) Is self-disclosure reciprocated at the three levels of intimacy?, (3) Does reciprocity vary over time and if so, how does it vary?" Reciprocity of exchange in the social penetration process deals with one person's disclosure and the likelihood that another person will disclose because of that person's

disclosure" (Altman & Taylor, 1973, p. 50). The study begins by explaining the limitations of other linear studies and the importance of longitudinal research for viewing the social penetration process as a system. This six-week longitudinal study with same-sex dyads who had no history together before the experiment produced results that seemed to support the social penetration process. "The results showed: (1) a convex quadratic trend for private-personal disclosures over time, (2) reciprocity at the same level of intimacy as an interactional norm (especially at the beginning and end of the relationship); (3) a cyclical fluctuation of reciprocal interacts over time" (Vanlear, 1987, p. 299).

From the description and research done on social penetration theory, it is now imperative that I do a critical evaluation of this theory in order to see the importance and utility of it in communication research. My evaluation will include these 5 criteria: (1) theoretical scope, (2) appropriateness, (3) heuristic value, (4) validity, and (5) parsimony (Littlejohn, 1992). Theoretical scope refers to a theory's comprehensiveness and would cover a wide range of events beyond a single observation. Social penetration theory as it now stands would be said to have a fairly narrow theoretical scope or be rated neutral to low on this criterion. This is because while Altman and Taylor (1973) and other researchers claim to be coming from a systems

perspective, they fail to do any research beyond the scope of two people in a relationship. Social penetration has the potential to broaden its theoretical scope by not only examining the "acts" of social penetration by an individual, but also the affects these "acts" have on the persons within the system that this individual is working.

Next, a theory must be looked at to see if its claims are consistent with its assumptions, or its appropriateness. I would rate this theory between high and neutral on the continuum. While social penetration theory does remain consistent throughout most of its hypotheses and explanations about how these hypotheses occur, there is a question of whether its research supports the claims and assumptions that it makes. This, too, deals with philosophical perspective. After claiming to take a "systems" stance, Altman and Taylor (1973) conduct little research dealing directly from the systems perspective. Because of this finding, however, social penetration theory would have a high heuristic value. Altman and Taylor (1973) used a wide range of theories in forming this theory and many theories have birthed from it. There is much research yet to be done looking at it from a systems perspective and the ways in which each individual relationship affects the functioning of the system as a whole. It would have to be said that social penetration theory has a low to neutral validity because we are looking at it from a systems

perspective. There has been much controversy as to what systems theory is really trying to do. "If the theory attempts to describe phenomena as they really are, it is invalid. It posits similarities among events that are not really there. If, on the other hand, the theory provides merely a useful vocabulary, attributed similarities among events are only semantic and are therefore useless for providing understanding of those events" (Littlejohn, 1992, p. 60). Lastly, in terms of its parsimony, I believe social penetration theory would be rated very high in this category. The theory begins with two basic hypotheses which can be used to explain most of the concepts that make up its framework. Metaphors such as the "onion skin" structure also help to increase its parsimony.

Social penetration theory relates to each and every one of us on a daily basis - the formation of relationships in our lives. How we choose to deal with or not deal with them is at the core of this research. Because social penetration has such an impact on our lives, the study of it in terms of the communication process could help us learn how to better form and function in these relationships and in the systems that we function in every day. It is because of this fact, that studying social penetration theory is of great importance to the study of communication. What we as researchers choose to do with this theory is now up to us. It would be a great

injustice to the theory to just stop here when there is so much more to be explored.

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